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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 002174

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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN OPPOSITION: RUNNING IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

REF: YEREVAN 2105

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Disagreements among Armenia's three main opposition parties have become more evident in the aftermath of the November 27 constitutional referendum and subsequent opposition rallies. Radical Republic Party Chairman Aram Sargsian insists that opposition leaders band together to establish a new "anti-government committee" with regional branches to unite Armenians against Kocharian in a post-referendum standoff. Armenia's People Party Chairman Stepan Demirchian rejected Sargsian's call and, on December 14, announced that opposition leaders should rally supporters only after devising a clear -- and thus far elusive -- set of next steps. Artashes Geghamian, the leader of the opposition National Unity Party, has chosen to steer clear of recent lackluster rallies altogether. End Summary.

RALLYING, BUT NOT REALLY COMING TOGETHER

[1](#)2. (SBU) While protesters continue to rally in Yerevan's streets against the results of the November 27 constitutional referendum, the opposition appears as fractured as ever -- mostly along party and personality lines. Opposition leaders have resorted to their usual tactics of public disagreement by proxy (via press releases and open letters) as they attempt to devise a still-unclear campaign against the Kocharian administration. Opposition rallies have captured headlines, but have attracted dwindling numbers of lukewarm supporters (no more than 500 at the December 9 rally) who are mostly adverse to the cold weather. Some opposition leaders, including Raffi Hovannissian, are predicting that the opposition rally scheduled for December 16 will be the last until after the local holiday season ends in mid-January). Local press reported rumors that during the December 9 opposition rally, key opposition figures Stepan Demirchian and Aram Sargsian refused to speak to each other even though they shared the podium; Demirchian did not speak to the crowd and arrived well into the rally, while Sargsian clearly held the "key-note" position among the speakers).

OPPOSITION "UMBRELLA" IDEA ALREADY LEAKING

[1](#)3. (SBU) A number of opposition parties (with some notable exceptions), led by the Republic Party's Aram Sargsian, have proposed a "United Opposition" format that would combine smaller opposition parties under a loose umbrella structure. Sargsian and others have suggested that the structure would include an "anti-government committee" with regional branches throughout Armenia. Opposition newspapers compared the committee with the "Karabakh" Committee that was influential in rallying Armenians during the independence movement and N-K war in the late 1980s. Vazgen Manukian, the head of the National Democratic Union Party and former leader of the Karabakh committee did not deny the rumor that a new alliance between Sargsian's Republic, Hovhannissian's Heritage Party and his party might be formed. This move would lead to the formation of the most radical wing of Armenia's opposition.

[1](#)4. (SBU) While smaller opposition parties are listed as supporters of this new structure, major factions of the opposition have come out against the proposal. Armenia's People Party Chairman Stepan Demirchian made public statements on December 14 calling the formation of a new committee "hasty" and refusing to link his People's Party with the initiative. Demirchian announced December 15 that the opposition should rally supporters in the streets (the preferred tactic of some of his opposition colleagues) only after devising a clear set of next steps. He has told his supporters to stay away from opposition rallies indefinitely.

The Armenian National Movement of former President Ter-Petrosyan has also not joined Sargsian's party.

GEGHAMIAN: "THIRD WAY" OR "THIRD WHEEL?"

15. (SBU) Artashes Geghamian, chairman of the National Unity Party, has steered clear of this latest tranche of alliances and splits within the opposition. He announced on December 14 his party's decision to avoid post-referendum protests. In an interview with RFE/RL, he said that public rallies were "not timely." While this message is similar to Demirchian's, Geghamian has been careful to distance himself from Demirchian and the People's Party. (Note: Geghamian's party ended its boycott of parliament earlier this year in a very public split with Demirchian's Justice Bloc. End Note.) Geghamian is anxious to portray his party as an "alternative" to the other opposition groups but also admits openly that there have been disagreements between him and opposition leaders that made his full participation in pan-opposition structures problematic.

COMMENT: MAJOR OPPOSITION PARTIES STILL NOT UNIFIED

16. (SBU) Turf wars among Armenian opposition parties are not new. This latest round of jockeying comes at a unique moment, however, with the aftermath of the controversial November 27 referendum still playing out. The fact that the three largest groups within the opposition (Demirchian's, Sargsian's and Geghamian's camps) cannot agree on how to react to the referendum may point to a larger-than-usual fissure, with significant impact on their ability to mobilize resources and people, as lackluster attendance at recent rallies may suggest.
EVANS